Well-being of Migrant Workers in China: Are They Better Off in the Cities?

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1. Introduction

A result of the 1978 transition towards a market-based economy in China is an expanding group of mobile population as labour migration patterns are intricately linked to the relaxation of restrictions on migration and accompanying economic reform. As such, China’s social fabric experienced profound changes, with the emergence of more than 260 million mobile people among the total population of 1.34 billion. Among them, about 150 million are rural-urban migrant workers who belong to the lower strata of workers in China. These workers are granted fewer privileges and denied access to vital resources as compared to the urban migrants or residents. Commonly referred to as the ‘floating’ population or ‘blind’ migrants, they are commonly marginalized in the host cities and powerless against institutional discrimination enforced by the Household Registration System (Hukou) and rural-urban divide. (Ngok, 2012)

Migrant workers have been, and continue to be, a major driving force behind China’s industrial development. According to an estimate by the UNESCO and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, migrant workers in China contribute to 16% of China’s overall GDP growth during the past two decades. (China Daily, 2006) In addition, according to the Institute of International Labour Studies, migrant workers comprise a significant 40% of the urban labour force in 2006. (Institute of International Labour Studies et al., 2006) These factors highlight the value of migrant workers to China’s working class and the state’s paramount priority – steady economic growth and social transition. The pressure to safeguard the interests and rights of this group is thus raised, especially with the mounting literature in this aspect which garnered widespread anger and sympathy among the public and media in both the local and international arena. (Li, 2008)
1.1 Research Gap

Current literature attributes the exploitative nature of labour migration to the state discriminatory policies and deep-seated social inequalities between the rural and urban areas. (Chan, 1996; Solinger, 1999; Wu, 2004; Wang, 2005) Scholarship has also cited China’s path of a Stalinist-socialist growth strategy which focuses on rapid development and heavy industrialization in the cities as one of the main reasons drawing rural migrants to the urban cities in search of better prospects. This leads to the exploiting of the rural sector, and a growing spatial disparity between the urban industrial and rural agricultural sectors. (Chan, 2010) Efforts by the Party-State to enact labour laws and ease the constraints of the Hukou system on migrant workers have also been explored in scholarship. Despite policies to level the inequality faced by different groups in the workforce, migrant workers still belong to the lower strata of the working class, thus pointing to the ineffectiveness of state efforts, especially in terms of the implementation of policies. (Zheng, 2009)

As seen from above, available literature provides a comprehensive understanding of the reasons behind the continued and reinforced lower status and privileges granted to migrant workers, and established that rural workers migrate despite facing harsh working and living conditions in the cities.

However, the motivation of workers to seek migration in spite of the potential problems they would face in the urban cities has not been sufficiently explored. Migrant workers are faced with the dilemma of potentially improving their well-being from pursuing urban work as second-tier workers, or continuing rural work in the comparably economically backward countryside, usually in poverty. Current scholarship seems to suggest that the economic position of migrant workers would improve with urban employment. While studies have been conducted to document the experiences and measure the level of economic
happiness among migrant workers (Lu & Song, 2006; Gao & Smyth, 2011), there has not been a conclusive study assessing whether migrant workers are indeed better off seeking urban work. An analysis of their well-being and life satisfaction beyond the economic aspect is necessary to obtain an overall valuation of any changes affecting their quality of life.

Acquiring an analysis of whether rural-out migration places migrant workers and their families in a more favourable position would require building on the current available literature. In the following section, the review of literature consists looking at different measures of quality of life, comparing and understanding the dilemma of migrant workers from the viewpoints of different authors, and ascertaining the best unit of measurement to cater to the context of migrant workers in China.

2. Literature Review

The definition of quality of life has to be narrowed down for the purpose of this paper. While quality of life (QOL) appears to be a simple construct, it entails the consideration of many different contexts such as health, education and leisure time. QOL is defined by the World Health Organization as ‘an individual’s perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live, and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns’. (WHO, 1995) As opposed to the concept of standard of living which is primarily based on income and economic well-being, QOL extends beyond economic terms and provides a broader and more accurate assessment of the level of personal satisfaction in life. (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993)

A common relevant unit of measure is the Personal Well-being Index (PWI). The PWI works on a scale which contains eight indicators of satisfaction level which corresponds
to a QOL domain – these indicators are standard of living, health, achieving in life, relationships, safety, community-connectedness, future security, and spirituality/religion. (International Wellbeing Group, 2006) The PWI explores the social and economic position of the individual in terms of aspects such as family and community life, income earnings, material well-being and job security. These factors take into account the current and future self-perceived feelings towards the individual’s current and future expected conditions of living. This affects their ability to experience enjoyment and satisfaction in life.

The open-ended nature of data collection for PWI, given that broad questions are asked to cover each aspect of personal well-being, provides rather accurate data given that indicators of well-being vary among people. Questions such as ‘How satisfied are you with what you are achieving in life?’ allows respondents to interpret the question based on their varied personal experiences, and leaves room for complex answers which are more representative of the respondent’s feelings. However, a possible setback of using this unit of measure is the ignoring of potentially important aspects of well-being, and the fact that general questions disallow the specific study of the effects of particular factors of well-being, such as the effects of the lack of social security for migrant workers for the case of this study.

Another possible measure is the conceptual framework designed by The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to define and measure well-being in its Better Life Initiative. As compared to using PWI as a unit of measure, it goes further to quantify levels of personal well-being through considering conditions under which achievements of well-being are attained. (OECD, 2013) While the PWI measures subjective aspects of QOL, this unit of measure goes beyond that and includes the objective aspects, such as the quality and availability of jobs, quality of and access to housing, education, work-life balance, civic engagement and good governance. The sustainability of well-being is questioned further, through the defining of four major types of capital which affects an
individual’s future well-being; namely natural, economic, human and social capital. As a comprehensive approach to assess well-being, this unit of measure allows for the evaluation of specific aspects which directly affect the QOL of migrant workers in China, such as the access to and quality of working and living conditions.

A third well-used unit of measure is the level of happiness. There is a vast amount of literature on the determinant of happiness, which emerged as a result of psychological studies on the topic. (Frey & Stutzer, 2002; Clark et al., 2008) Happiness is a subjective concept, rendering its quantification problematic, especially across a heterogeneous group. While migrant workers belong to the same group and class of workers in China, there are in fact variations among the group, for example, variations in the motivations for migration and duration of stay. These nuances have to be accounted for to ensure the accuracy of the study. As compared to the PWI and concept designed by OECD, the determinants of happiness encapsulates important factors which are present in both units of measurement, but is lacking in the possible subjective interpretation of data results given that the definition and expectation of what constitutes happiness vary for different people.

Scholarship on the level of happiness of migrant workers in China is scarce. A prominent research undertaken by Gao and Smyth utilized the level of happiness as a measurement to find out the motivations behind migration patterns in China. Based on the research, a defining reason for migrant workers to seek urban work is due to the expected remuneration in terms of income, regardless of any realistic increase in income. The prospects of a better standard of living compel rural people to seek urban employment, with the assumption that a better financial position leads to attaining a better QOL for both themselves and their family. With a positive expectation of their financial position and, by extension, for their lives to take a positive turn, it has a positive effect on their current levels of happiness, which far outstrips any realistic increase in their actual income level. (Gao &
Several other studies have also suggested that migrants’ pre-migratory expectation of future life at the urban cities may have important effects on their post-migratory QOL. (McKelvey et.al, 1993; McKelvey et.al, 1996; Williams & Berry, 1991)

A wide range of literature about the different living and working conditions of Chinese migrants in the urban cities as compared to their QOL in their rural hometown and urban residents is available. The International Labour Organization estimates that twice as many migrants as urban residents have a six-day work week, and more than half of the migrant population report for work seven days a week. (ILO, 2007) In terms of coverage, it is uncommon for migrant workers to participate in any form of social security schemes, pension insurance or unemployment insurance. (Nielsen and Smyth, 2008) A possible explanation is presented by Ngok, who argues that migrant workers are usually not aware of their rights and channels to redress their grievances. Surveys conducted by Ngok in Guangzhou revealed that the average awareness of migrant workers about each type of services available is not high. Hence, despite the measures undertaken by the Party-State to balance out inequality among different groups in the workforce and provide social security, the accessibility to services and a non-preferential treatment towards migrant workers is limited by the worker’s ignorance. (Ngok, 2012) This suggests that the implementation of policies has not been effective, especially in reaching out to the migrant workers and ensuring that policy objectives are met.

Similarly, Ou and Kondo argue that with the further differentiation of the rural-urban migrants from urban residents and migrants due to the Hukou System, these workers tend to experience distinctive wage inequality and occupational segregation. (Ou & Kondo, 2013) Furthermore, migrant workers commonly suffer harsh working and living conditions given their nature of work. Given their status as rural Hukou holders, migrant workers can only assume ‘temporary’ legal status and permanent ineligibility for local citizenship which increases their vulnerability and makes them easily disposable, and limits their job
opportunities to the lowest-end factory jobs among other jobs. (Chan, 2010) This is further substantiated by authors such as Solinger, Cai and Fan who argue that migrants are barred from taking up jobs which belongs outside the 3-D category ('dangerous, dirty and demeaning’) in most cities and export zones. (Solinger, 1999; Cai, 2007; Fan, 2008).

While it has been established by many authors that migrant workers benefit from their move in economic terms at the expense of their working and living conditions, there is a lack of literature on the QOL of these workers if they were to stay in their rural communities. Migration entails a spatial displacement of migrant workers, which withdraws or distances migrant workers from their relationships in their home society, leading to tensions. This is aptly explored in the film, Last Train Home, which tells the story of a family struggling to bear the toll caused by the strains of living apart. With parents working as migrants in the big city, the responsibility of child rearing and parenting falls on the guardian. Tensions can arise especially in the family given the difficulty in developing strong long-distance relationships. (Fan & Cross, 2009) The impact of their long-term absence from their home in the community can thus have a negative effect on the emotional health of migrant workers.

3. Conclusion

China’s migrant workers have been a significant driving force of the country’s economy, generating a competitive edge especially in the export economy in the international market. Despite their contribution, migrant workers are usually not given their fair share of the economic pie, and are classified as low status workers occupying jobs with harsh working conditions. Furthermore, constraints from the restrictive Hukou system and prevailing rural-urban divide disallows them from enjoying basic privileges such as social security and a decent quality of living, especially when contrasted with the urban residents and migrants,
whose access to welfare is prioritized by the Party-State. This begets an important question:
Are migrant workers better off seeking urban jobs despite the harsh working and living conditions? Addressing this question would require assessing the quality of life in both the rural and urban areas of these migrant workers, which can be done through various units of measurement such as the Personal Well-being Index, measure of well-being by the OECD, and the level of happiness. However, available literature on the quality of life in the rural areas for these workers has not been substantive; this could be a possible area for further research.
4. Bibliography


